Student Support Services Program Annual Performance Report (APR) Frequently Asked Questions and Responses Program Year 2001-2002

Over the years, we have received numerous questions about the Student Support Services Annual Performance Report. Listed below is a summary of the most frequently asked questions divided into what we define as "Technical Questions" and "Programmatic Questions."

Section I: Technical Questions are related to computer programs, software issues, and electronic submission requirements. Questions 1 through 8 of this section address issues related to *Preparing the Annual Report* while Questions 9 through 15 address issues related to *Submitting the Annual Report* to the Department of Education.

If you have additional technical questions, you should contact our Help Desk by either telephone (703-846-8233 ext. 247) or e-mail at SSSWEB@CBMIWEB.COM.

Section II: Programmatic Questions provides interpretations of the data requirements of the report. For answers to these types of questions, please contact your program specialist directly. A state listing of program specialist assignments is available at the following web address:

http://www.ed.gov/HEP/trio/ssassign.html

PREPARING THE ANNUAL REPORT

Each Student Support Services project is required to prepare the annual performance report in accordance with the instructions provided. A copy of this performance report is also available at the following web address:

http://www.ed.gov/HEP/trio/studsupp.html

There are five sections to the performance report.

- Section I is project identification information;
- Section II requests demographic data on project participants;
- Section III requests data on project services and activities
- Section IV is the summary of project performance objectives; and
- Section V is instructions for preparing the electronic file of individual participant records.

Prior to the due date for submitting the annual performance report to the Department of Education, each grantee must prepare electronic files with the individual participant records (Section V) and the summary of other project objectives (Section IV).

I. TECHNICAL ISSUES

Question #1: How should a project begin to prepare the performance report?

Response #1: First, a Student Support Services (SSS) project must review the required data elements (Sections II, III, and V of the report) to ensure that the project is collecting all the required information. If some data elements are not being collected, the project should develop plans and procedures for collecting the required data.

Next, the project should determine how it will prepare the electronic data file of individual participant records. Below, in response to question #2, is a brief discussion of options available for preparing the participant data file.

If you currently have a management information system for your project with participant level information, you may choose to create a Text file or export the data to a spreadsheet or database. If, however, your project does not have a database or the database does not capture many of the required data elements, you may decide to use the Department's SSS Visual Basic (VB) data collection tool (see discussion of this tool under question #3).

Question #2: What options are available for preparing the participant data file (Section V of the performance report)?

Response #2: A grantee has three basic options for preparing the participant data file. You may choose any of these options, provided you submit the data in accordance with the instructions for preparing the participant data file (Section V of the performance report). These instructions are available at the following web address:

http://www.ed.gov/HEP/trio/studsupp.html

Option A: Use the database or spreadsheet that you currently use to capture and manage your project data and then export the data required for the performance report to an Excel spreadsheet, Access database (mdb) or database file (dbf). If you choose this option, you must:

- change your column names to match the "Database Column Names" provided in column three of Section V – Record Structure for Participant List (If you are using Access, you must change the column names in the "Design, Table".);
- provide the data (columns or fields) in the same order as the data fields in column one are listed in Section V of the report instructions (i.e., the first column of your spreadsheet must be PR, the second column must be BatchAY); and
- use only the valid field content provided in column 8 of the report instructions. For example, the valid field content for "Gender" (field #8) is 1 for Male, 2 for Female and 0 for No response. Values such M for Male and F for Female are not acceptable values.

Option B: Prepare a Text file in accordance with the record structure provided in Section II-A of the report. A Text file (sometimes called an ASCII text file) is a text only document that contains no formatting, e.g., word processor files insert special (nonreadable) characters for bold text, italic text, and underlined text, etc. Most current word processing software will save a document as an "text" file, usually under the Save As… and Save As Type. . . options. This will remove all special formatting from the file. The advantage to a text file is that it is a standardized file type and many different software packages can read the data in the file. Once you have created the text file, you must check the file to ensure that the data fields exported correctly and that the data elements meet the valid field content requirements provided in column 8 of Section V of the report instructions.

Option C: Use the SSS Tool developed by the Department of Education for capturing and submitting the performance report data.

Question #3: What is the SSS Tool?

Response #3: The SSS Tool is a self-installing Visual Basic software application that you may use to collect the data required in Section V of the performance report. The SSS Tool is a stand-alone application that requires no additional software to run. However, in order to properly run this application, you must have an IBM-compatible PC with the Windows 95 (or higher version) desk operating system.

This tool is designed to assist grantees, especially those without participant databases, in meeting the performance reporting requirements. Grantees, without an automated participant recordkeeping system, may use the tool to manually enter the participant information. The tool will also help grantees check the quality of their data submissions in order to reduce the number of potential errors associated with importing data to the TRIO databases. Once all the required data are entered, the project can create a file to upload via the SSS Performance Report web site and submit to the Department of Education as Section V of their performance report.

The application is available for download from the following web site:

http://www.ed.gov/HEP/trio/sssperfreport.html

Instructions for using the tool, as well as a Help Line telephone number and e-mail address, are provided on the web site once the tool is ready for distribution.

Question #4: Must a SSS project use the SSS Tool?

Response #4: No. As noted above under the response to Question #2, SSS grantees have several options for preparing the individual participant records. You are encouraged to select the method most compatible with your current data management systems.

Question #5: What is a delimited text file?

Response #5: A delimited text file contains rows of information that could be displayed as a spreadsheet or table format. However, since it is a text-only file, no special formatting can break up the information into columns. Therefore, a delimited text file consistently uses characters throughout the document to indicate a column break. These characters are known as the delimiters. Nearly any character can be a delimiter, but the most common delimiters are the comma and tab. Following is an example of using delimiters:

Prefix	First Name	Middle Initial	Last Name
Mr.	John	T.	Doe
Mrs.	Jane	A.	Smith

The previous table contains two records of data, one for each person. An example of a comma delimited text file containing the same information, without the column names, is as follows:

“Mr.”,”John”,”T.”,”Doe”
“Mrs.”,”Jane”,”A.”,”Smith”

A tab-delimited file would essentially be the same, but tabs would replace the commas.

Question #6: What if the data is in MS Works Spreadsheet?

Response #6: When the user finishes entering all data into the MS Works database, the best format to send that data to the Department of Education is as a dBASE file.

- To create a dBASE file from MS Works, insert a floppy diskette into the A:\ drive.
- Start MS Works and the database that contains all the student data.
- Select **Save As** from the **File** menu. The *Save File As Type* will be an option on the **Save As** dialog box. Under *Save File As Type*, the user needs to select dBASE IV. Also, select the A:\ drive as the file destination.
- Then select Save or OK.
- You can then upload the file into the new UB Performance Report web-site to submit to the Department of Education.

Question #7: How can one prevent Microsoft EXCEL from automatically dropping the initial “0” in a date field?

Response #7: EXCEL attempts to convert all numbers to a correct format. By entering “022571” in a field, EXCEL will convert that to “22571” because that is a true number. *To avoid this problem, the cell needs to be formatted as a text field.*

- If you are entering data where an entire column will be in above format, select the entire column by clicking on the grayed column name, for example “E” so that it turns gray.
- The next step is to select the Format menu and the “Cells…” prompt. You can also do this by clicking on your right mouse button while the mouse is over the highlighted column and selecting “Format CellsK”.

- A tabbed dialog box should now appear. The first tab is named "Number" and that is the tab you need to work with.
- Change the category to "Text". DO NOT change the category to "Date" because it can give you some unexpected results.
- Once the cell/cells have been formatted as text, EXCEL will maintain the original "0" in "022571".

Question #8: What does "A", "N", and "A/N" mean in the Type column of the record structure (Section V of the performance report)?

Response #8: These letters are abbreviations for the following types of data:

"A" stands for alpha characters (A to Z). For those fields designated by an "A", only alpha characters are valid entries. If using Access, select "Text" in the field type.

"N" stands for numeric characters (0 to 9). For those fields designated by a "N", only numbers should be provided. For example, Field #1 requests the student's social security number (SSN). The only valid entries in this field are numbers. Hyphens should not be inserted in this field. If using Access, select "Number" in the field type.

"A/N" stands for alpha and numeric characters. Fields designated by "A/N" may contain alpha characters (A to Z); numeric characters (0 to 9); and punctuation marks such as periods, apostrophes, and dashes. If using Access, select "Text" in the field type.

SUBMITTING THE ANNUAL REPORT

Question #9: Are SSS projects to submit the annual performance report electronically?

Response #9: Yes. All SSS projects are expected to submit the annual performance report via the World Wide Web. The web application for submitting the report through the web will be available at the following web address on November 15, 2002.

http://www.ed.gov/HEP/trio/sssperfreport.html

Question #10: How does a project use the web to submit the annual performance report?

Response #10: The web application for SSS grantees to use to submit the SSS annual performance report has the following features:

- Instructions for using the website, an introduction to the data collection, and Online Help;
- A web form for completing Sections 1 through III on line;
- Functionality to upload electronic files with the narrative summary of other project objectives (Section IV) and the individual participant records (Section V);

- A print button to make a hard copy of the information entered;
- A submit button to send the entire report to the Department of Education; and
- An e-mail confirmation that the report has been submitted (if an e-mail address is provided when completing Section I).

Question #11: How are the summary of project objectives (Section IV) and the participant records (Section V) uploaded?

Response #11: The SSS Performance Report web site has features for you to use to upload a file with participant data and another file with the narrative summary of project objectives and accomplishments. Once you are at the site and have entered your project identifying information in Section I and completed Sections II and III, you will be given two methods to upload your files:

Enter the file name:
- When prompted, enter the file name into the window (i.e., A:\Student.txt); and
- Click the Upload button to start the file upload.

Or use the Browse feature to locate the file:
- Click the Browse button to open the window that will allow you to locate the file with the participant data (or the summary of objectives) on your computer;
- Click on the file name so it is highlighted;
- Click on the Open button to select the file name and close the Browse window; and
- On the SSS web page, click on the Upload button to start the upload.

With either method, when the upload is completed, the web page will display the "Filename" and "File Path." Check these before proceeding to ensure that the correct files were uploaded.

Question #12: Will a project receive confirmation that the report has been successfully submitted?

Response #12: Yes. When completing Section I of the report on-line, the person entering the performance report data will be asked to provide an e-mail address. After the report is completed and you click on the "Submit" button, a message will display indicating that your performance report has been successfully submitted. A confirmation will also be automatically e-mailed to the e-mail address provided.

Question #13: After electronically submitting the report, should a project also send a paper copy of the report with the original signature of the project director and certifying official?

Response #13: Except for Section I of the report form, the Department of Education only requires the electronic version of the report. <u>A grantee, however, must submit via fax, a signed copy of Section I of the report form that certifies that the information submitted electronically is accurate, complete, and readily verifiable.</u>

Question #14: What is the mailing address for submitting the annual performance report?

Response #14: A mailing address is not needed, since the performance report should be submitted on-line. The web address for submitting the report electronically will be available as of November 15, 2002 at:

http://www.ed.gov/HEP/trio/sssperfreport.html

Question #15: When is the annual report due?

Response #15: In accordance with Department regulations, the annual performance report is to be submitted within 90 days after the end of each 12-month grant (budget) period.

The performance reports for most Student Support Services projects are due on or before November 30 of each year. However, the Department of Education has extended the due date for submitting the 2001-02 report to December 31, 2002.

Grantees should not wait until the last week to submit their performance reports via the World Wide Web, as this practice has the potential of overloading the web sites. When there are a large number of users on a web site at one time, there may be interruptions and delays. SSS grantees are asked to submit their performance reports as soon as complete data are collected.

II. PROGRAMMATIC QUESTIONS

Question #1: What is a "batch year"?

Response #1: The Batch Year (Field #2 of the Record Structure for the Participant List -- Section V of the performance report) designates the grant (project) year that is being reported. The batch year changes with each annual submission of individual participant records. The Department designates the Batch Year as the beginning year of the 12-month grant period. This may or may not be the same as the school year or academic year designations of some institutions. The Batch Year was chosen because TRIO projects are forward funded, (e.g., Fiscal Year 2001 funds are used to support the 2001-2002 project year). For the 2001-02 SSS performance report the "Batch Year" is 2001. Thus, the individual participant information provided will be for those students served by the project from the Summer or Fall of 2001 through the Spring or Summer of 2002.

Question #2: What PR/Award Number should be used?

Response #2: A grantee should use the PR/Award Number applicable to the grant (budget) period covered by this report. This number can be found in Block 5 of the Grant Award Notification. Be sure to use the PR/Award Number applicable to the reporting year even if you have been awarded a new grant and PR/Award Number.

Please note that the PR/Award Number is eleven (11) digits. Please be sure you use "zeros" instead "Os" when entering the PR/Award Number into your database.

Question #3: How should two-year colleges classify students who are graduating or transferring with more credits than are required for an Associate's degree?

Response #3: If a student graduated or transferred from the grantee institution during the reporting period, the current college grade level (Field #18) should reflect the student's grade level as of the date of last enrollment at the grantee institution. The project does not need to report the grade level at the receiving institution of the project participant who graduated from a two-year college and then transferred or who transferred to a four-year institution with a specific number of credits prior to graduating.

A grantee must only track project participants and prior year participants for as long as they are enrolled at the grantee institution. For students who left the institution during the report period, the project need only report on the latest known status.

Question #4: Should prior year participants be included in Section V?

Response #4: The data file requested in Section V of the performance report should be a complete listing of current and prior year project participants who are still enrolled at the institution. However, the information provided in Sections II and III of the report should only include the participants (new and continuing) served during the report period.

Question #5: How long after leaving an SSS program should student records be maintained on the database file?

Response #5: Records of Student Support Services participants should be included on the annual data file for the duration of the student's enrollment at the grantee institution.

Question #6: Does the grantee need to provide financial aid information and grade point averages on prior year participants?

Response #6: With the exception of fields #24-28, related to financial aid, the grantee should provide updated information on prior year participants for as long as they are enrolled at the grantee institution. Please note that the Department no longer requires grantees to report financial aid information on prior participants.

Question #7: What is the difference between prior year participants and continuing participants?

Response #7: Prior year participants are students who were served by the project during a previous reporting period but who have not received services during the current reporting period. Continuing participants are students who first were served in another reporting period and who also received services during the current reporting period.

Question #8: Should a project report on students who qualified for the project, but were not served, if they are tracked as a comparison group?

Response #8: Students who did not receive services from the project are not considered project participants and therefore should not be included in Section V. However, these students may be used as a comparison group for reporting project accomplishments in Section IV of the performance report. Thus, a project may maintain information and track the progress of these students to document the progress of SSS participants compared to non-SSS participants.

Question #9: How should a project classify students who were scheduled to graduate, but did not, during the reporting period?

Response #9: Students who do not graduate but continue in their academic program should be counted as continuing participants in Field #19. If a participant leaves the institution prior to graduation, select the appropriate reasons from the choices in Field #19.

Question#10: How should two-year colleges classify students in field #18 who are graduating or transferring?

Response #10: For students that left the institution during the reporting period, a project need only report on the last known status. Two-year institutions can report on students who graduated and transferred in field #19.

Question #11: Should two-year colleges classify students as freshmen and seniors in fields #17 and #18?

Response #11: To ensure uniformity in reporting, two-year institutions should refer to their students as first year (freshmen) and second year (sophomores).